

Hinduism Answers

Chapter One: The Beginning

Civilization in the Indus Valley

1. What distinguishes a civilized society from one that is uncivilized?

Civilized society is characterized by laws, government, and the development of a culture.

2. Around which river valley did civilization develop in India?

Indus River Valley

3. What two ancient Indian cities have been unearthed by archaeologist?

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa

4. What archaeological finds link the Hindu religion to early Indian civilization?

Clay statues of gods and goddesses found at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa resemble the gods and goddesses that Hindus worship today.

Enter the Aryans

1. List several different theories as to what happened to the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa.

The two cities might have been destroyed by either floods or volcanoes. Or they could have been destroyed by the invading Aryans.

2. What did the name *Aryans* refer to?

The name Aryans meant “noblemen” or “owners of land”

3. Why do you think Indra was looked upon as the main Aryan god?

Not only was Indra the Lord of the Sky, but he was also the giver of rain and the god of war.

4. From what source does most of our knowledge of the Aryans come?

Much of what we know about the Aryans comes from the Vedas.

The Caste System

1. What led the Aryans to establish the caste system?

Aryans established the caste system to keep the people they conquered subdued, and to maintain their identity as a separate people.

2. What is the difference between a *varna* and a *jati*, or caste?

A *varna* was a large group, at first based on color and then on means of livelihood. Within each *varna* are thousands of *jatis*.

3. What four *varnas* made up the caste system?

Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras

4. What were Sudras forbidden to hear or recite?

The Sudras were forbidden to hear or recite anything from the Vedas

5. What was the duty of the Kshatriyas?

The duty of the Kshatriyas was to serve as rulers and warriors.

6. Why were those who were outside the caste system referred to as “untouchables”?

They were called “Untouchables” because members of the upper *varnas* believed they would become defiled or polluted if they touched them.

7. In what way did Hinduism uphold the caste system?

Hinduism upheld the caste system by teaching that people were born into a certain *varna* and remained in it all their lives.

Chapter Two: Beliefs and Worship

Brahman and Atman

1. What do Hindus prefer to call their religion?

Hindus call their religion *Sanatan dharma*

2. Who or what is Brahman?

Brahman is the Supreme Spirit that is everywhere.

3. What is the relationship between Brahman and the Hindu gods Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu?

Brahmn, Siva, and Vishnu are considered different manifestations of Brahman.

4. What is Atman?

Atman is the soul found in all living things.

5. Why do Hindus hold cow to be sacred?

The cow, in addition to being thought sacred because it is a living thing, has always been an important part of Hindu life. It has provided transportation and milk, and it has pulled the plow used in farming.

Dharma, Karma, Samsara, and Moksha

1. What does each Hindu's *dharama* depend on?

Dharma depends on such factors as one's family background and means of livelihood.

2. What are *ashramas*?

Ashramas are the four stages of life Hindus pass through

3. Explain the renunciation state of a Hindu's duty.

During the renunciation stage, a Hindu is called upon to give up all worldly possessions and become a holy monk.

4. What is *Karma*?

Karma has to do with one's action and behavior.

5. What is *samsara*? When does samsara come to an end?

Samsara is "reincarnation", or the process of being reborn into another life or life form after death. It comes to an end when moksha is attained.

6. How is *moksha* attained?

Moksha can only be attained when the soul becomes completely pure and has detached itself from all worldly things.

7. What is *Raja yoga*?

Raja yoga is one of the paths that lead to moksha. It consists of meditation.

Hindu Worship: The Mandir

1. What is a Hindu temple called?

A Hindu temple is called a *mandir*.

2. What is a *murti*?

A *murti* is an image or statue of a god or goddess.

3. Why do worshippers remove their shoes before entering a *mandir*?

Worshippers remove their shoes to show respect for the *murtis* in the temple.

4. How does a *pujari* prepare a *murti* for worship?

A *pujari* washes and dries the *murti*, applies a paste of sandalwood to it, and makes a *tilak* mark on its head. Then he dresses it in red and gold clothes and decorates it with flowers.

5. What is the significance of the *arti lamp*?

The *arti lamp* contains five flames which stand for the five senses. Worshippers believe that if they hold their hands over the flames and then rub their foreheads, they will receive power and blessing from the god.

6. What is *prasad*?

Prasad is blessed food consisting of fruit, nuts, or sweets given to worshippers when they leave a *mandir*.

Worship at Home

1. How do shrines in Hindu homes vary?

Shrines may vary from a simple shelf to a separate room set aside for worship.

2. What are *mantras*?

Mantras are verses from Hindu holy books.

Symbols

1. What is a *swastika*? What does it represent to Hindus?

A *swastika* is an ancient symbol that resembles a cross with bent arms. To Hindus, it is a sign of peace and good luck.

2. How did Nazi Germany prevent the use of the swastika?

Nazi Germany adopted the swastika as their emblem - an emblem which became a symbol of evil.

3. What is the origin of the sacred syllable *om*?

The symbol *om* represents the sound of Brahman.

4. What role does *om* play in Hindu worship?

Hindus utter the syllable “om” when they begin and end prayer. They also use it in hymns and mantras.

Chapter Three

Gods and Goddesses

1. What is the *Trimurti*?

The Trimurti is the group of three gods consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva.

2. Why is Brahma not as important to Hindus as Vishnu and Siva?

Hindus believe that after Brahma created the world, he had very little to do with it.

3. Why is Brahma shown having four faces?

Brahma is shown having four faces because he sees everything that is happening.

Vishnu

1. Why is Vishnu called “the Preserver”?

Vishnu is called the “Preserver” because Hindus believe he has come to earth on numerous occasions to protect them from danger.

2. What are *avatars*?

Avatars are the different forms taken by Vishnu

3. What message is conveyed by Rama's story in the *Ramayana*?

The Ramayana teaches Hindus that good overcomes evil.

4. How did Krishna say one could end the cycle of birth, death and rebirth?

Krishna says that the cycle can be broken through devotion to him.

5. Why is Krishna shown as having blue skin?

Krishna is shown with blue skin because, like the sky, he is everywhere and eternal.

6. What did Hindus believe Krishna will do when he returns to Kalki?

Hindus believe that when Krishna returns as Kalki he will judge all people according to their deeds.

Siva (Shiva)

1. Why is Shiva called “the Destroyer”?

Siva is called the “Destroyer” because he is believed to destroy the world, as well as things such as wars and disease.

2. What does the circle of flames around Natraja's head represent?

The circle of flames around Natraja's head symbolizes the destruction and recreation of the world.

3. What is represented by the demon on which Natraja is dancing?

The demon represents ignorance.

4. What is the significance of images that show a river flowing through Siva's hair?

The Ganges River is said to have flowed from heaven to India through Siva's hair.

5. Who is Parvati?

Parvati is the wife of Siva.

Other Gods and Goddesses

1. Why do Hindus worship Ganesha?

Ganesha is worshiped as the god of wisdom and strength who prevents things from going wrong.

2. How did Ganesha come to have an elephant's head?

Siva, after cutting off the head of a boy created by Parvati, instructed his servants to cut off the head of anyone found sleeping with their head facing north. This turned out to be an elephant, and Siva took its head and attached it to the body of the boy.

3. Describe Hanuman's appearance

Hanuman is depicted as having the head and long tail of a monkey.

4. What does Hanuman represent in the Hindu family of gods?

Hanuman represents intelligence.

5. Who is Shakti?

Shakti is the Mother Goddess.

6. Why do Hindu's worship the goddess Laksmi?

They worship Lakshmi as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is thought to bring good fortune to those who worship her.

Chapter Four

Festivals and Holidays

1. During which Hindu month is Dasera observed?

Dasera is observed during the Hindu month of Aswin.

2. Which god or goddess is honored?

The Mother Goddess is honored during the festival of Dasera.

3. In what ways is Dasera a happy festival?

Dasera is a happy festival in that people decorate their homes and shrines and give each other gifts.

Diwali

1. Why do people decorate their houses and other buildings with rows of lights during Diwali?

People decorate with rows of lights in the belief that evil can be driven away by light.

2. Which goddess is honored during this festival?

The goddess Lakshmi is honored during Diwali.

3. What do business people and shop owners strive to do during Diwali?

Business owners strive to make sure their account books are balanced and their bills are paid.

4. In what ways is Diwali a family festival?

Diwali is a family festival in that people exchange gifts and cards and invite friends to dine with them.

Holi

1. What is the origin of the name “Holi”?

Holi comes from a princess named Holika.

2. Why is Holi also known as the Festival of Color?

Holi is also known as the Festival of Color because it celebrates the changing colors of the season.

3. What do people douse each other with during Holi?

People douse each other with red powder.

4. What is the origin of the bonfire at Holi?

The bonfire stems from a king ordering his daughter to sit inside a bonfire and hold his son on her lap. The king was furious with his son for refusing to worship him as a god. But instead of the son being burned to death, it was the daughter who perished.

Other Festivals

1. What is the significance of the silk bracelet Hindus tie around the wrists of friends and relatives during Raksha Bandhan?

The silk bracelet is believed to protect people from danger and harm.

2. Which scripture or story is read non-stop for eight days and nights before the celebration of Krishna's birthday?

Hindus mark pilgrimages to such places as sacred shrines, temples, towns, villages, rivers, and mountains.

3. What do people pull through the streets during the festival honoring Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe?

Hindus go on pilgrimages to worship at special temples or to visit with noted gurus. Others hope to gain merit, or good karma. Still others want to either atone for breaking religious laws or to purify their minds and bodies.

Chapter Five

Holy Places

1. Why do devout Hindus see all of India as sacred?

Hindus consider all of India sacred because they believe the presence of Brahman is everywhere.

2. To what kinds of places do Hindus make pilgrimages?

Hindus make pilgrimages to such places as sacred shrines, temples, towns, villages, rivers, and mountain.

3. For what reasons do Hindus make a pilgrimage?

Hindus go on pilgrimages to worship at special temples or to visit with noted gurus. Others hope to gain merit, or good karma. Still others wanted to either atone for breaking religious laws or to purify their minds and bodies.

Important Sites

1. Which four sites or places do devout Hindus try to visit? Which gods do these sites honor?

The four sites are Badrinath in the north, Rameshvaram in the south, Puri in the east, and Dwarka in the south. Rameshvaram honors Siva; the other three honor Vishnu.

2. Which mandir is the richest temple in India? How does it acquire its wealth?

The richest temple is Tirumala-Tirupati. It acquired its wealth from offering and gifts from well-to-do Hindus, as well as from gifts of money from ordinary pilgrims.

Holy Rivers

1. How many rivers in India are considered holy?

Seven rivers in India are considered holy.

2. Which river is thought to be the most sacred?

The Ganges River is thought to be the most sacred.

3. Why is the Ganges called the “River of Heaven”

The Ganges is so-called because of the belief that it flowed from heaven to earth through Siva's hair.

4. Why do Hindus believe in bathing in the Ganges and other holy rivers?

Hindus believe that bathing in these rivers will wash away their sins and bad karma.

5. Why do Hindus scatter the ashes of the deceased in the Ganges River?

Hindus believe that by scattering the ashes of the deceased in the Ganges River the cycle of continuous reincarnation will be broken.

Other Holy Places

1. Why do Hindus consider the Himalayas sacred?

Hindus look at the Himalayas as the “dwelling place of the gods.”

2. What are shikharas?

Shikharas are tall towers on some mandirs. These towers represent the mountains on which the gods live.

Chapter Six

Sacred Writings

1. What distinguished shruti texts from other Hindu scriptures?

Shruti texts are believed to have been revealed directly to wise men by Brahman.

2. What does the word *veda* mean?

Veda means “knowledge” or “wisdom”

3. Which of the four Vedas is considered the most important? What does it contain?

The Rig-Veda is considered the most important. It contains hymns and poems praising Aryan gods and goddess.

4. When did the Vedas come into existence?

The Vedas came into existence between 1200 and 1000 BC

5. What is the origin of the term *Upanishads*?

The origin of Upanishads refers to students and others sitting around and listening to the teaching of gurus.

6. Who is *gurus*?

Gurus are wise men or teachers

Smriti Texts

1. What text is the Bhagavad Gita a part of?

The Bhagavad Gita is a part of the Mahabharata.

2. Which god is the central figure in the Bhagavad Gita?

Krishna is the central figure in the Bhagavad Gita.

3. What are several teachings or lessons presented in the Bhagavad Gita?

One lesson is that people must do their duty. Another is that love is more important than the size of an offering to a god.

4. What story is told in the Ramayana?

The Ramayana deals with Rama rescuing his wife Sita from the demon Ravana.

5. Who is Ravana? Hanuman?

Ravana is the evil demon who rules the island of Lanka. Hanuman is the monkey god who helps Rama rescue his wife.

6. What message is presented in the Ramayana?

The Ramayana stresses that good overcomes evil.

7. What do the Puranas contain?

The Puranas contain myths and stories about the gods and goddess.

8. What do the Laws of Manu contain?

The Laws of Manu contain rules about how Hindus should live their lives, as well as the duties of each caste and punishments for crimes.

Chapter Seven

Everyday Life

1. What are *samskars*?

Samskars (sacraments) are special ceremonies performed during a Hindu's lifetime.

2. Who often chooses the name for a newborn child in a Hindu household?

The name is often chosen by the eldest woman in the house.

3. Why were Hindu babies originally confined to the home for the first five weeks of their lives?

Babies were confined to the home for the first five weeks of life to protect them from bad weather and all infectious diseases.

4. Why is a young boy's head shaved when he is about one year old?

Removing a boy's hair is symbolic of erasing the bad karma from the previous life.

5. What is the significance of the sacred thread ceremony?

The sacred thread ceremony is a coming-of-age rite for a boy. Afterwards, he is considered to be a man.

Marriage

1. How are Hindu betrothals (engagements) different today than in past years?

Hindu couples today have more freedom in choosing their mates, unlike in the past when marriages were arranged by parents.

2. Why does a priest check the horoscope of a prospective bride and groom?

A priest checks the horoscopes to make sure the two are compatible.

A Hindu Wedding

1. Why do most Hindu weddings take place between December and July?

Most Hindu weddings take place between December and July because major festivals and India's monsoon season occur from August through November.

2. Why are swastikas printed on some Hindu wedding invitations?

Swastikas are printed on wedding invitations as a sign of good luck.

3. What is the *homa*?

The *homa* is the sacred fire that is lit during a wedding ceremony.

4. Why does the groom drop ghee and grains into the home fire?

The groom drops ghee and grains into the *homa* as a symbol of fertility.

5. What is the significance of the Seven Steps?

At each of the Seven Steps, the bride and groom make promises to each other.

Funeral Customs

1. What is *suttee*? Why was it discontinued?

Suttee was the custom of a wife throwing herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. It was discontinued because Hindu reformers convinced the British government to make it illegal.

2. Why are funeral pyres often built near a river or stream?

Funeral pyres are built near a river or stream so that the ashes can be thrown into the waters, reducing the chance of the deceased being reborn into a new life.

3. Why do relatives of Hindus who die in other countries arrange for their ashes to be flown back to India?

Relatives want the ashes of the deceased to be scattered in the Ganges River.

4. What is the *shraddha* ceremony?

The *shraddha* ceremony is a ceremony held two weeks after a person dies. Its purpose is to help the dead person's soul acquire a new body for its next life.

Other Aspects of Daily Life

1. Briefly describe the status of Hindu women in the ancient times.

Hindu women in ancient times had very little freedom and they were considered their husband's property to do with as he saw fit.

2. What rights did women in India gain under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955?

Under the Hindu Marriage Act, women gained the right to divorce their husbands and to seek alimony.

3. Why do Hindus not eat beef?

Hindus do not eat beef out of reverence for the cow.

4. Why do devout Hindus not eat such foods as beets and watermelon?

These foods are red in color and remind one of blood.

5. What are some popular spectator sports in India and other places where Hindus live?

Acrobatics, cricket, and wrestling are popular spectator sports.

6. Name several games Hindu children play that are similar to games played by children in America.

Similar games include blind man's bluff, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek.

Chapter Eight

Hinduism Since Ancient Times

1. Which conqueror made India part of the world's first great empire?

Alexander the Great made India part of the world's first great empire.

2. Which king was responsible for most of India becoming Buddhist?

Asoka was responsible for most of India becoming Buddhist.

3. What view did the Muslims who invaded India about A.D. 700 take toward Hinduism?

The Muslims attempted to stamp out Hinduism in India.

4. Who built the famous Taj Mahal?

Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal.

British Rule

1. Which European nation was the first to establish trading posts in India?

Portugal was the first to establish trading posts in India.

2. Which trading country had gained control of most of India by the 1750s?

The British East India Company gained control of most of India by the 1750s.

3. What methods were used by Mohandas Gandhi to attain Indian independence from Great Britain?

Gandhi used nonviolent fasting and the boycott.

4. In what ways was India partitioned in 1947?

The nation of Pakistan was created on either side of India.

5. What was East Pakistan called after 1972?

East Pakistan became the nation of Bangladesh.

Hinduism Elsewhere

1. Name several countries to which Hinduism has spread.

Hinduism spread to such places as Nepal, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, East Africa, Guyana, Surinam, Bali, and Fiji.

2. Who are the Hare Krishnas?

The Hare Krishnas are a Hindu sect that worships the god Krishna. It sprang up in the 1960s.